



# *Standing Up for the Health of your People*

An HR Professional's Guide to  
Navigating the Standing Desk Movement

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**VITALITY WORKS**  
Sanitarium Workplace Health

## INTRODUCTION

### Some say sitting is the new smoking.

There's no argument - too much sitting is physically bad. The truth is, in the modern office set-up, with our comfy chairs, email, Internet, elevators and fancy phones, we find ourselves with very little reason to get up and move. And herein lies the problem! Automation has become the enemy of agility. Sitting has become our default position and subsequently diseases related to sedentary behaviour continue to rise.<sup>1,2</sup> The tide, is beginning to turn however. Sit-stand desks and an appreciation of the need to move more at work is steadily gaining interest and understanding.



*So how can the HR professional navigate this sea change?*

While it is great that awareness is on the rise, it is not just a change in mind-set that is required. The reality is, traditional office environments provide little or no opportunity to stand or move throughout the day. So the physical environments and the way we work in them need to change.

#### **The bridge to change:**

***Organisational culture and the policies that shape it.***

#### **In this paper we shine light on:**

- The benefits of moving at work - both financial and physiological
- The options for standing desk set-ups
- The role of organisational culture - the roadmap to change
- Top tips to creating a more agile workforce

*The benefits of standing, movement and having an agile workforce*

Other than the well-documented and publicised hazards to the health of individuals who spend too much time seated, there is a variety of other reasons why change of position and standing can benefit both the individual and the organisation.

**These benefits are both financial as well as physiological....**

1. Boyle, T., Fritschi, L., Heyworth, J. & Bull, F. (2011). Long-term sedentary work and the risk of subsite-specific colorectal cancer, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 173, 1183-1191.

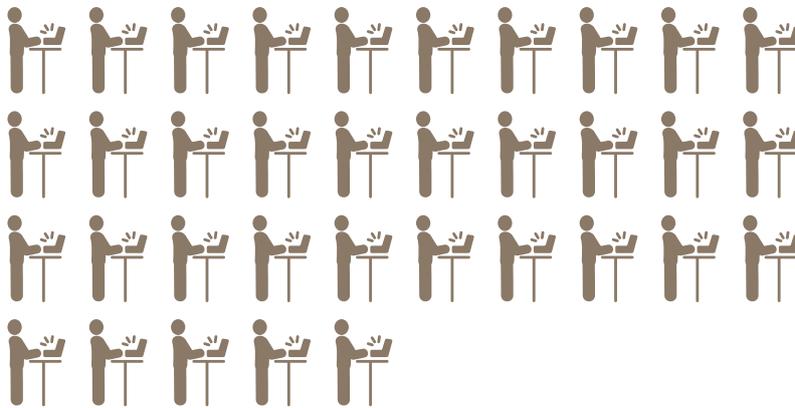
2. Owen, N., Healy, G. N., Matthews, C. E. & Dunstan, D. (2010). Too much sitting: the population health science of sedentary behavior. *Exercise and sport sciences reviews*, 38(3), 105-113.

# THE FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF MOVEMENT

A recent study conducted by Vitality Works aimed to determine the benefits and issues experienced by individual employees when sit-stand desks were implemented in the workplace.

## Findings

- A significant reduction in both absenteeism and the rate of 'early report' incidents for discomfort, pain or injury (DPI) was recorded.
- Staff members reported increased levels of focus, concentration and energy, and improved feelings of self-confidence.
- After just six months of using the sit-stand desks, sick leave reduced by 0.16 days per employee per month (39%), in comparison to the levels reported for the previous 24 months.
- This equated to savings of \$10,072 in only six months.
- The sit-stand desks cost \$669 per person and were projected to be cost neutral within 14 months (based on average savings, per employee, per month of \$48 in reduced absenteeism).



**35**  
Participants  
using sit-stand  
desks



**6** months



**39%**  
Reduction in sick leave  
(based on a reduction of 0.16  
days per employee, per month)

## INSIGHT

ROI of sit-stand desks is measurable. Collect your statistics on sick leave prior to and recalculate after installation and every six months thereafter.

**14** Months to  
become  
cost neutral

**\$10,072**  
Actual savings in just six months

# PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF MOVING & MINGLING

Apart from the benefits gained by changing our default working position to standing, evidence has also been emerging on the benefits of having 'agile workforces' that move and mingle.

When seated for long periods, our body undergoes a number of negative changes, including reduced blood flow around our body, particularly to the brain, which reduces our cognitive ability.

## INSIGHT

When moving, our blood flow increases allowing us to think more critically and creatively.



According to the *Medical Journal of Australia*, being sedentary (i.e. too much sitting) is not the same as being 'physically inactive' and too much sitting cannot be fully negated by physical activity. Even if workers meet physical activity guidelines (i.e. are physically active), they can still have high exposure to sedentary time. Excessive sitting time, after adjusting for physical activity, accounts for 5.9% of all-cause premature mortality, according to this same article.

## Managing the transition to becoming an upright agile workplace

The options for transitioning from a traditional workplace to one that promotes movement and standing vary greatly between organisations. How you plan to make changes and how long these will take depend on your organisational budget, existing furniture contracts, culture, and your health and safety policy, in force.

A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled 'Workplaces that Move People' discussed the emergence of offices that are designed to make staff move and mingle. Studies are beginning to reveal that face-to-face interactions are essential activities within the office environment.

## INSIGHT

Designing working environments that promote 'casual collisions' and interaction between workers improves performance<sup>3</sup>.



## INSIGHT

The transition to a more agile workforce will not only involve changes to furniture i.e. the physical environment - but it will require a change in culture.



3. Waber, B, Magnolfi, J. & Lindsay, G. A spotlight on the 21st-century workspace: Workspaces that Move People. *Harvard Business Review*. October 2014.

# CHANGING THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Let's first consider the physical options to assist in the transition to creating a less sedentary, more agile workforce.

## Sit-stand desks

One solution to get staff in sedentary roles up and moving is installing sit-stand desks. A sit-stand workstation is one that adjusts from a sitting to standing position (and back) throughout the day.

These will be easily adjustable in height. The optimal standing desk is one that allows the user a quick and easy transition from sitting to standing. Typically these desks will need to adjust 400 to 500mm. There are various mechanisms available to enable such adjustment.

### Some examples are:

- Electric adjustment
- Gas/spring mechanisms
- Manual crank handles (or similar)

In Europe there are now many companies with electric sit-stand desks as standard. In some cases they are programmed to move to a standing position for certain periods of the day.

Many of the health benefits of sit-stand desks manifest from regularly changing position and moving between a seated and standing position. So don't take the chairs away.

There is a wide choice of commercially designed standing workstations available ranging from fixed-height desks, sit-to-stand desks and, for the more adventurous, treadmill-style desks. Keep in mind spatial design and ensure you design workspaces keeping the job role and the desired outcomes in mind.<sup>3</sup>

### Setting up a new office?

This is the perfect opportunity to provide staff with ideal workspaces that will give them the ability to change position and move throughout the day.

### Seated desk conversions

While purpose-built standing desks can be costly there are cheaper options to get your staff on their feet. A standing desk can be as simple as placing a box, shelf or small table on their existing office desk.

Where standing desks are not adjustable, it can be good to provide stools to enable them to take the weight off their feet for short periods of time through the day.

## DID YOU KNOW



Many of the health benefits of sit-stand desks manifest from regularly changing position and moving between a seated and standing position. So don't take the chairs away.



## CHANGING THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT (continued)

### Transformation of Communal office areas

It is also important to keep in mind that standing and physical movement can be promoted by the way we design areas within the office; such as communal areas, meeting rooms and shared facilities.

Look for potential to impact these shared areas by creating opportunities for staff to stand, move and collide.

Making standing part of the everyday working landscape and culture can help to encourage the idea of standing for all staff, especially those who may have been less likely to make the shift alone.

In addition, standing in communal spaces allows more people to converge in one place creating a more social and welcoming environment than seated areas.

#### Options to transform communal areas:

- Standing meeting tables in communal office spaces
- Standing bar tables in staff lunch rooms
- Standing workbenches



### Managing demand for sit-stand desks

With an increasing awareness around the risks of inactivity and the benefits of standing, you may find you have to manage an ever-growing demand for sit-stand desks. If your current office space is fitted with good-quality and relatively new seated furnishings it may not be feasible to introduce sit-stand desks on a large scale.

In this situation, implementing a policy or criteria on the provision of sit-stand desks can be a good way to ensure they are provided to those who are most in need. Below are some points to keep in mind when managing demand and developing a policy or criteria for provision of sit-stand workspaces:

#### Medical Considerations

Priority should be given to those with injuries or illnesses that would directly benefit from the opportunity to stand and change position when working. Specific criteria may be required, such as limiting the provision of sit-stand desks to those with a 'specific ongoing or permanent medical condition'.

#### When implementing these criteria it may be useful to:

Request medical documentation to confirm the stated health-related condition. Such documentation should provide supporting medical evidence that confirms the injury/illness/condition. It should show the employee has had previous treatment, or continues to receive treatment from a health practitioner.

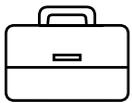
#### Prioritising by Job Role and Tasks

The nature of a job role and the tasks it involves is an important factor for consideration in deciding who is provided sit-stand desks. Priority should be given to those whose roles do not allow them to move away from their workspaces or take regular breaks.

# CHANGING THE CULTURE

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, a positive and supportive culture is a key to cultivating a more agile workforce. If you need assistance in convincing management of the benefits of change, take particular notice of steps 1 to 3 below. Once the convincement process has been dealt with, ensure that change is led by example. Leaders literally need to walk their talk!

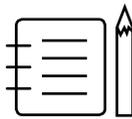
## 6 Steps to creating an agile workforce



1

### Create a business case

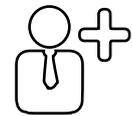
Put together a business case to support the reduction of sedentary work practices and the promotion of standing and movement. Include details of potential return on investment through improved productivity and reduced absenteeism and injury.



2

### Educate managers

Educating managers on the hazards of sitting and the benefits of standing and movement is essential to creating an environment where staff will feel comfortable making changes. If workers see managers standing more, they will be encouraged to do the same.



3

### Involve managers in policy making

A good success strategy is to involve leaders in the policy making, once they understand the importance of movement at work.



4

### Make it “part of the way we do things around here”.

It is essential to actively promote change and make sure it's seen as OK to take a short break from your desk, stand up in a meeting or to have walking meetings. One of the keys in making this happen is having leaders visibly involved, encouraging others to do the same.



5

### Make like it's the 1980s

Remember when we didn't have email? We walked and talked more, no doubt. Create a culture where people send less internal emails. Encourage personal contact, like walking across the office to see colleagues face to face. This will not only increase breaks and movement, but also generate opportunities for 'casual collisions' that boost creativity and productivity.



6

### Measure!

Capture your organisational statistics around injury, sick leave etc. at the outset of this journey and again once change has been in place for a reasonable amount of time. Present the findings to managers. Quantify your evidence where possible.

You could also consider interviewing staff about their thoughts on the changes implemented and how this has impacted them positively. Collate and present these findings to management.

## IN SUMMARY

With the growing body of research on the risk of sedentary behaviour, there is no escaping the fact that creating opportunities for employees to stand and move more will be of increasing importance going forward.

A recent article in the *Medical Journal of Australia* contends that by not addressing the 'hazard' of sedentary working practices, organisations are not providing a 'safe system of work', and therefore not complying with health and safety legislation.<sup>4</sup> That being said, there is no reason to wait for legislation before you start implementing healthy practices that promote sitting less, standing more and moving regularly.

**See our top tips below to start your organisation's journey to creating a more agile workplace.**

★ **Cultivate a culture of agility** Change starts from the top down! Enlist and work with managers to formulate your policies and shape a supportive culture where movement is embraced.

★ **Create a policy** Establish a good foundation by incorporating the idea of reducing sedentary behaviour into organisational policies and procedures.

★ **Give priority** Sit-stand desks are the obvious solution to getting people changing position; however, we understand this not always possible. We recommend developing a policy around sit-stand desks and setting criteria that ensures these desks are provided to those most in need.

★ **Don't throw away the chairs!** Remember to provide an appropriate seating option for staff when transitioning to a standing work environment. We are only looking to change the default position to standing. Many of the health benefits manifest from regularly changing position, and moving between a seated and standing position.

★ **Target communal areas** Create opportunities to stand in communal areas – think: meeting rooms, lunch rooms, standing bar leaners and workbenches. Also keep in mind shared facilities. There is no harm in making employees take a few more steps to pick up the printing!

★ **Design with intent** When setting up a new office space or changing your current one, make sure standing and movement are key components in the design process. Think about job roles and tasks and where the physical environment can be used to improve health outcomes and productivity. For example: removing bins and/or printers from your office and positioning them in central areas.

Vitality Works is a leading Australasian provider of workplace health solutions. From on-site medical services and health assessments, to fun, educational health and well-being programs, Vitality Works partners with organisations of all sizes to create: *Healthy People > Thriving Business*

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4. Straker, L., Healy, G. N., Atherton, R. & Dunstan, D.W. Excessive occupational sitting is not a 'safe system of work': time for doctors to get chatting with patients. *Medical Journal of Australia* 2014; 201 (3): 138-140.